ISSN 0824 5134

84- 2857 /

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Centre for Criminological Research

Public Opinion and the Legalization of Abortion

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Discussion Paper 5

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ABSTRACT

This research attempts to explain variation in public approval for legalized abortion with variables representing dominant status groups and expressive/symbolic beliefs. Various conditions of abortion are considered and several multiple regressions are reported in order to examine net effects of predictor variables as well as the possibility of interaction effects. There was little support for the hypothesis that membership in a dominant status group would result in greater approval of legalized abortion. Rather, expressive variables, particularly those of a religious nature, were more important than status group membership in explaining public opinion on this topic. The implications of these results for Canadian abortion legislation are discussed.

Mainly as a result of the labeling or social reactions approach to crime and deviance, sociologists have increasingly directed their attention away from criminal behaviour and the criminal toward the study of law and its enforcement. So while Vold (1958) and Akers (1968), among others, have noted the importance of explaining the criminality of behavior, and a few early studies of the law making process were conducted (Sutherland, 1950; Hall, 1952; Chambliss, 1964), it remained for labeling and, later, conflict theories to provide the major impetus for such a shift in focus. Stimulated by these perspectives, then, criminologists have been increasingly concerned with the processes through which behavior is defined as criminal in a pluralistic society (Hills, 1971).

To date, much of the research in this area has focused upon the role and activities of moral entrepreneurs (Becker, 1963) and special interest groups. The present work, in contrast, focuses upon public opinion and attempts to locate the main social cleavages in such opinion with respect to one area of criminal legislation. Specifically, this research attempts to explain variation in expressions of approval for legalized abortion by reference to a number of predictor variables. As such, this paper represents a contribution toward explaining a central issue in the sociology of law, namely the relation between criminal law and more general social norms and interests.

Theoretical Background

At least four perspectives in the sociological study of the law suggest processes by which laws are created or defeated (Vago, 1981; Goode, 1978). The widely popular rationalistic model (e.g. Clinard, 1974; Sutherland and Cressey, 1974) assumes that law evolves because there is the need to solve a widely recognized problem. A functionalist approach (Bohannan, 1967) suggests that law simply represents "custom reinstitutionalized". The conflict model (Chambliss,

1964) suggests that one particular subset of values comes to be represented in the law through the exercise of power, and a moral entrepreneur model (e.g. Becker, 1963; Gusfield, 1967) describes how certain values become law through organized social influence.

A central concern in much of the recent literature on law and its enforcement has been the debate between the so-called consensus versus conflict approaches. From the consensus perspective the law is an expression or representation of basic societal values upon which there is wide-spread agreement, as well as a reflection of common interests. In contrast, the conflict approach asserts that the law is an instrument for protecting the material interests and supportive beliefs of a dominant ruling class or, more generally, the more powerful segments of any society.

Both the rational and functional models imply that there is a close link between public opinion and criminal legislation and thus represent a consensus view of society. In contrast, both the conflict approach and the moral entrepreneur approach assert that the law is an instrument for protecting the interests and supportive beliefs of only a segment of the total population. They, therefore, suggest a more problematic link between law and public opinion.

Consensus and conflict versions of society are widely seen as being in direct opposition to each other, even though early consensus statements suggest many coercive elements in the law. For instance, it was Durkheim (1933) who suggested that laws may vary in their form, viz. repressive vs. mechanical solidarity. Later versions of consensus theory tend to downplay the coercive element, whereas conflict theorists emphasize it, as well as limiting the purpose of law to that of control.

The partisans notwithstanding, it has become increasingly clear that in its present form the conflict-consensus distinction is a sterile debate. Thus Hills

(1971) has commented that each perspective may be essentially correct for certain criminal laws while remaining invalid as an explanation for others and that the law itself can actually shape consensus on cultural norms. "The degree of coercion and consensus involved in the social genesis of any particular criminal statute and in the forces that shape its change is problematic, although aspects of both coercion and consensus appear to be present in all legal systems (5-6)". Furthermore, Hopkins (1975) has persuasively argued that efforts to adjudicate between the two models are ill conceived. He emphasized the need to distinguish the type of behavior in question, the temporal dimension of initiation of legislation from its consequences over time, and called for more research on the possibility of coalitions among interest groups and on the extent to which the success of interest group initiative depends on community indifference or tacit support.

More recently, Hagan et al. (1977) advanced the argument, following Turk (1969), that as dominant status groups -- well educated, white-collar, higher-income, northern, urban, Protestants -- become more sophisticated, they employ a more selective use of the coercive powers of criminalization. So to the extent conflicts of attitudes become widespread it is dominant groups that are more likely to endorse the more tolerant viewpoints. Drawing on Hagan's (1977) distinction between "consensus and conflict crimes", and using NORC attitudinal data, these authors reported support for the hypothesis that dominant status groups are more likely than subordinate status groups to disapprove of consensus crimes (assault) but to approve of conflict crimes (homosexuality).

A further distinction which may prove useful in explaining the formulation of criminal law concerns the different functions or justifications for such legislation. Nettler (1978) has made the point that the criminal law is not

merely or solely pragmatic or instrumental, although it certainly has this role when we consider such justifications as deterrence or rehabilitation. The criminal law is also moral or expressive, particularly when we consider its retributive and symbolic functions. The point to be made here is that, in part, the criminal law is an expression of some moral value, a symbol of particular beliefs. As Hills (1971) has pointed out, moral values themselves may be considered worthy of legal protection when challenged and their basic rightness reaffirmed through the law in an attempt to control the threatening behavior of others. Gusfield (1967), in his study of the temperance movement, showed that such symbolic functions do not depend on successful enforcement of the law. Rather, the mere existence of the law symbolizes the public affirmation and dominance of certain values and beliefs. It is likely, therefore, that public attitudes toward a particular piece of criminal legislation will vary partly as a result of the influence of moral concerns. Thus in addition to considering the dominance of particular status groups, it may prove fruitful to explore the impact of moral values or expressive beliefs on public attitudes toward criminal legislation.

We decided to explore these distinctions in one area of criminal legislation, namely public attitudes concerning the legalization of abortion. We chose to investigate public attitudes or opinions since, although both consensus and conflict approaches incorporate them into their explanations, the research literature has largely ignored their significance. There has been some research on public attitudes concerning the seriousness of existing crimes (Akman, et al., 1967; Rossi, et al., 1974), as well as work focused upon the congruence between public opinion and legal sanctions (Boydell and Grindstaff, 1974; Thomas, et al., 1976; Warr, et al., 1982). But there has been little research focused more directly on the determinants of public approval or

disapproval for criminalizing certain types of behavior. Gardiner (1967) concluded that public attitudes toward gambling are more permissive than U.S. statutes and Smigel (1956) reported that public attitudes toward stealing are related to the size of the victim organization. Rooney and Gibbons (1966) called for investigations of the degree of support by public consensus for existing legislation concerning "crimes without victims", as well as study of the social correlates of variations in societal reactions. More recently, Berk and Rossi (1977) suggested that public opinion may have an indirect impact on the legal system. They found that criminal justice elites who supported prison reforms may not act on their preferences since they believed the general public strongly supports a custodial approach. Berk, et al.'s (1977) study of legislative change in the California penal code concluded that a plurality of interest groups was involved in initiating this legislation but the generalized values and beliefs of the public placed some constraints on the types of laws considered. But Hagan (1980), from his review of research on the legislation of crime and delinquency, noted that there is very little evidence on the issue of the opposition or support for legislative efforts on the part of the general population.

Abortion was selected as the behavioral focus of this research since it is currently the subject of a good deal of public debate and therefore is a good example of what Hagan (1977) called "conflict crimes". Cook and Dickens (1978) noted that in the decade 1967-1977 at least 42 jurisdictions have changed their abortion laws, 39 extending the grounds for abortion while three have narrowed them. In 1973 the U.S. Supreme Court decisions in Roe v. Wade and Doe v. Bolton decriminalized medically conducted abortions, disallowing state regulation until after the first trimester. Yet as these authors point out, these judicial decisions have generated proposals for a constitutional amendment by pro-life

groups as well as legislative efforts to limit the availability of abortion services funded publically. Utilizing NORC survey data from 1972-1978, Ebaugh and Haney (1980) have recently documented a pronounced conservative trend in U.S. attitudes toward abortion after some fifteen years of increasing liberalization. However, this conservative shift occurred only for those abortion conditions over which a woman exercises more control. Attributing this shift to the growing influence of the pro-life movement, Ebaugh and Haney state that the Supreme Court decisions appear to have done little to ameliorate public debate on abortion since public attitudes are still varied and the issue is still quite controversial. Similarly, Blake (1977) concluded that the U.S. public is less permissive than the Supreme Court concerning justifications for abortion, as well as far less tolerant than the judiciary on related issues such as the timing of abortion, whether it should be performed only in hospitals, when human life begins and whether abortion should be lawful without the husband's consent. She is also of the view that the change in the legal status of abortion in the U.S. wouldn't have occurred for many years without judicial action since the more restrictive public opinion would have restrained legislatures.

In contrast to the U.S. situation, Canadian regulation of abortion is more restrictive and change has come about through legislative rather than judicial activity. Amendments to the Criminal Code in 1969 allowed a woman to seek legal termination of pregnancy in a hospital when that pregnancy is determined to be threatening to her life or health as certified by a hospital therapeutic abortion committee (Section 251). Subsequent to the passage of this amendment, the rate of legal abortions per 1000 women age 15-44 has increased from 2.5 to 11.6 (Statistics Canada, 1970; 1979). Sachdev (1981) has predicted that the incidence of unintended pregnancies will continue to show an upward trend in

Canada and, as a consequence, the demand for abortion will not only not fall in the near future, but may in fact rise among teenagers. This could contribute to increased public pressure for even more liberalized abortion legislation, such as removal of the requirement for approval by a hospital abortion committee and/or removal of the necessary justifications. In fact, one analysis of the amendments (Veevers, 1971) claimed that they were not a liberalization and do not make legal, therapeutic abortions available to everyone whose health would be endangered by carrying a pregnancy to term. Similarly, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada (1970) called for further amendments to permit abortion by a qualified medical practitioner on the sole request of any woman who has been pregnant for twelve weeks or less; and if more than twelve weeks pregnant if the doctor is convinced continuation of the pregnancy would endanger her physical or mental health or if there is a substantial risk of mental or physical handicap if the child is born. And the pro-life movement has also been active in seeking legislative and constitutional change in Canada. But in contrast to the situation in the U.S., to date there has been little research on the attitudes of the Canadian public toward changes in abortion legislation (Balakrishnan, et al., 1972; Boyd and Gillieson, 1975).

Correlates of Attitudes Toward Abortion

Previous research on attitudes toward abortion has examined a number of variables relevant to our focus upon status characteristics and expressive concerns. With regard to the expressive issue in law, the variables most frequently dealt with are religiosity and religious attendance. For subordinate versus dominant group status, studies have utilized the variables of age, religion, social class, education and sex.

Virtually every study which examined religion and abortion approval found a striking relationship between these variables. Catholics and/or Baptists are found to be the most opposed to abortion while Jews, Unitarians, Atheists, and those reporting no religion have the most liberal attitudes toward abortion. The relationship between religion and abortion attitudes has liberalized over the last fifteen years but the relative rank of various denominations in terms of attitudes toward abortion has remained the same (Jones and Westoff, 1978).

Religiosity (usually measured by church attendance) also has generally correlated with attitudes toward abortion. Those who attended church more frequently tended to be more conservative than those who attended less frequently (Cockerill, 1974; Westoff et al., 1978; MacIntosh et al., 1979).

Granberg (1978) utilized the 1975 NORC survey results for six attitudinal items concerning abortion to study the religious component in abortion attitudes. Granberg found that religious affiliation and education interacted and that religious involvement interacted with religious affiliation in determining attitudes toward abortion. In analyzing these data, he suggested that Catholics who opposed abortion seemed far more centered in their religion, while Protestants derived their opposition from elsewhere (a higher association with education). The most strongly supported conclusion in this study was that opposition to abortion represented a conservative or traditional approach to matters of personal morality.

MacIntosh et al. (1979) also explored religious affiliation and religiosity in some depth. This was one of the few studies to recognize that Protestantism does not represent a unitary ideology in terms of attitudes toward abortion. Within the Protestant churches there is a continuum of conservative to liberal positions on this issue. Once again, MacIntosh et al. utilized the NORC data with the six attitudinal items to measure abortion attitudes. As predicted,

"Differences in attitudes between Protestants and Catholics remained when participation was controlled...the Protestant/Catholic difference was especially great for those with high attendance patterns." Generally, the data suggested that as participation in religious groups increased, attitudes toward abortion tended to become more negative, regardless of the religious denomination to which the person belonged. The authors indicated that differential participation across various religious groups can lead to differing secular consequences and suggested that "A partial explanation for these findings is located within the recent literature on secularization in the changing nature of churches."

There is little evidence to suggest a strong relationship between age and approval of abortion (Boyd and Gillieson, 1975; Westoff et al., 1969; Blake, 1973; Cockerill, 1974; Pomeroy and Landeman, 1973). One might predict that with increasing age comes membership in the dominant status group and, therefore, more approval of abortion. However, there are several alternate hypotheses which probably tend to mitigate any such effects of age. First, the young may be more likely to approve of abortion because they have more at stake in such approval. They are the ones who are most likely to benefit from abortion. Second, there is a direct link between age and conservatism and conservatives are more likely to disapprove of abortion under all conditions. Hence, the absence of a strong relationship should not be surprising. In the case of social class, a direct relationship might be predicted such that abortion approval would be greater among the more dominant, higher class categories. This hypothesis has been supported when tested; however, it is confounded by a high correlation between social class and education (Cockerill, 1974; Balakrishnan et al., 1972). The relationship between sex of respondent and abortion attitudes indicates little variation between the sexes in terms of

attitudes toward abortion (Barnartt and Harris, 1982). One of the variables that does show a consistent and significant relationship with attitudes toward abortion is level of education. Those with more education have more liberal attitudes toward abortion (Jones and Westoff, 1973; Pomeroy and Landeman, 1973; Boyd and Gillieson, 1975; Balakrishnan et al., 1972; Granberg, 1978; Jones and Westoff, 1978; Greenglass, 1971; McCormick, 1975).

The literature, then, does show some relationship between attitudes toward abortion and dominant social status. However, the relationship is not consistent across all the variables examined.

In examining attitudes toward abortion, researchers have typically specified several different conditions to study variation in approval. In general, clear differences in approval have been found under different conditions, with more approval for legal abortion for physical or medical reasons than for social reasons. In the case of mother's health, all studies that examined this condition found strong support for abortion when the mother's health was in danger (Blake, Westoff et al., Balakrishnan et al., Granberg,). This attitude and current Canadian law are consistent with one another. However, neither the law nor the research offers a definition of health. There was also a good deal of support for legal abortion under the conditions of pregnancy caused by rape and when it was likely that the infant would be deformed if the pregnancy was allowed to come to term.

On the other hand, conditions such as "the mother does not want any more children" or "the family is in an economically disadvantaged situation" were not reasons that elicited high abortion approval. One study (Westoff et al.) found strong opposition to abortion in the case of economic disadvantage. Two others (Blake; Granberg) found that approval of abortion hovered around the 50% mark

for the condition of economic deprivation. The way in which the question was asked may have some effect on the responses. When asking about severe economic disadvantage, the Balakrishnan et al., 1972 study found some approval for abortion. Being married but not wanting children was also not considered a valid reason for abortion by the majority of the population (only 44% approved) (Granberg, 1978).

Given the current status of the literature concerning the role of public opinion in the formulation of criminal definitions, we decided to explore the determinants of public approval for legalized abortion. We expect to find a variety of public opinions depending upon the particular conditions specified. Specifically, opinion concerning legalization is likely to vary from fairly broad support under circumstances of medical harm to more limited support for social reasons. And the predictors of public approval may vary as well when considering abortion on demand as opposed to some liberalization of the law. Furthermore, following Hagan, et al. (1977), we expect that dominant status groups are more likely than subordinate status groups to approve of a widening of the grounds for legalized abortion. But we also expect to find public attitudes concerning legalized abortion influenced by expressive/symbolic beliefs and will explore their effect compared to that of status characteristics.

The present research will examine the issue of approval of legal abortion within a multivariate framework, with simultaneous controls on the effects of a number of predictor variables. Furthermore, a combination of interval, ordinal and categorical predictor variables will be utilized and the possibility of non-linear relationships and interaction between predictors will be explored. In the analysis we will also consider varying conditions under which Rs may approve of legal abortion, as well as distinguishing among a number of religious denominations.

Methodology

The dependent variable -- attitudes toward approval of legal abortion -- was measured by six items drawn from the literature. Rs were asked whether or not they thought it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if: there is a strong chance of serious defects in the baby; she is married and does not want any more children; the woman's own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy; the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children; she became pregnant as a result of rape; she is not married and does not want to marry the father. These items were combined into a scale with a range of zero (no approval) to six (high approval) by the Guttman technique. The coefficient of reproducibility was .94 and the coefficient of scalability was .78. The mean value of the scale was 4.17 with a standard deviation of 1.79.

Predictor variables were selected to represent both status characteristics and expressive beliefs. Status characteristics were indicated by age, gender, level of education, religious denomination, family income and father's ancestry. Dominant status groups were older, male, Rs with higher levels of education, members of Anglican, United Church or Presbyterian denominations, Rs with greater income and of British ancestry. Frequency of church attendance, religiosity, marital status, number of children, family life satisfaction, ideal number of children, approval of a married couple not bearing or rearing children and approval of a married woman working if she has a husband capable of supporting her were the expressive/symbolic measures. They were expected to reflect religious and traditional family values such that the more religious Rs and those with more traditional family beliefs and background would express or symbolize their values by greater opposition to liberalization of abortion laws.

The data were collected by interviews completed in the Spring of 1977 with 341 Rs, which represented a response rate of 85%. A sample of households was selected from the July 1976 Edmonton City Telephone Street Address Directory using a multi-stage area cluster design with stratification according to income, probability proportional to size and equal probability of selection of each household. Rs were selected from household members over eighteen years of age and were chosen on a sex quota basis so as to represent both sexes.[1]

Abortion Conditions

Although the bulk of our analysis will utilize the scale scores for attitudes toward abortion, we should begin by briefly reporting the frequency responses for the six conditions of abortion individually. Most (93%) Rs thought it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if her health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy; almost as many (89%) favored the possibility of a legal abortion if there is a strong chance of serious defects in the baby, while 85% thought a legal abortion should be possible if the woman became pregnant as a result of rape. But only half (51%) thought it should be possible to obtain a legal abortion if the family has a very low income and can't afford any more children, or the woman is married and doesn't want any more children (%), or isn't married and doesn't want to marry the father (47%). Perhaps Rs could be generally categorized into those who approve of legal abortions for medical reasons (mother's health or defects in baby) and those who approve for social reasons (low income, doesn't want children or doesn't want to get married), although a sizeable 85% approved if the pregnancy resulted from rape. Alternatively, these several conditions could be grouped in terms of the degree of individual control or responsibility attributed to the woman with the last three representing greater individual control.

Abortion Scale: Distribution and Analysis of Variance

The frequency distribution of the seven point scale measuring approval of legal abortion is displayed in Table 1. The mean and median are similar in value, though there is some negative skew. But the distribution appears somewhat bimodal, with 37% of the Rs having the highest scale score indicating approval of legal abortion under all of the six conditions. So a substantial minority of Rs adopted a very liberal stance concerning the legalization of abortion -- what in essence is abortion on demand. But less than five percent of Rs are completely opposed to abortion, while slightly more than a third (36%) expressed some limited, conditional approval (scale scores 1, 2 and 3). We will need to return to this question of the distribution later in the analysis.

In order to examine possible differences between or among categories of our social status and expressive variables with respect to approval of legal abortion, a number of one-way analyses of variance were performed and these are displayed in Table 2. Considering first the social status variables, there are no significant differences in approval of abortion by gender, age, or family income. However, Rs with varying levels of education do differ significantly with respect to their degree of approval of legal abortion. In general, Rs with lower levels of education are less approving, though there is a slight but statistically insignificant drop in approval at the highest level of education. The dominant status category of British ancestry exhibits a significantly higher mean approval score compared to the other subordinate status category. And also as expected, religious denominational affiliation is significantly related to abortion approval. Those Rs with no denominational affiliation (which includes atheists and agnostics) show the highest approval, followed closely by the

TABLE 1

Frequency Distribution of Abortion Scale

Scale Score	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
0	15	4.6	4.6
1	13	4.0	8.6
2	22	6.7	15.3
3	83	25.3	40.6
4	35	10.7	51.3
5	39	11.9	63.2
6	121	36.9	100
	328		

Mean = 4.168

Median = 4.386

SD = 1.785

TABLE 2

One-Way Analysis of Variance of Attitudes Toward Abortion

SEX	X	AGE	X	INCOME	X	EDUCATION	X	ANCESTRY	X
Male	4.18	18-25	4.74	<$10000	3.78	Grade School	3.60	British	4.60
Female	4.16	26-35	4.13	10000-14999	4.33	Some High School	3.93	Other	3.89
	F=.007	36-45	3.88	15000-19999	4.21	High School Grad	4.25		F=12.81
		46-55	4.05	20000-24999	4.20	Some College	4.71		p < .001
		56-65	4.21	$25000+	4.32	College or Post Grad	4.36		
		66-82	3.92		F=1.05		F=2.93		
			F=1.59				p < .05		
		N^2=.02		N^2=.01		N^2=.04			
		F=1.29		F=.79		F=1.17			

Table 2 (cont'd)

DENOMINATION	X	Church Attendance	X	Religiosity	X	Marital Status	X
None	4.97	Never	4.74	Strong	3.10	Single	4.27
Dominant Protestant	4.79	<1 per year	4.33	Somewhat Strong	4.28	Married	4.13
Subordinant Protestant	3.38	1 per year	4.27	Not very strong	4.53		
Catholic	3.37	several times per year	4.59		F=18.97 p < .001		F=.40
	F=21.82 p <.001	once per month	4.47				
		2-3 per month	3.62				
		every week	3.77				
		>1 per week	1.26				
			F=12.03 p < .001				
					=.12		
		N^2=.21			N^2		
		F=6.12 p<.001			F = 3.40		

Table 2 (cont'd)

NO. OF CHILDREN	X	Family Life Satisfaction	X	Ideal No. of children	X	Approval of No Children	X
0	4.25	very dissatisfied	4.80	One or none	5.00	strongly disapprove	3.05
1	4.05	2	4.88	2	4.29	2	3.66
2	4.31	3	3.38	3	4.22	3	4.00
3	4.36	4	3.93	4	3.84	4	4.21
4	4.31	5	3.85	5 or more	3.38	5	4.30
5 or more	2.97	6	4.40		F=1.86	6	4.61
	F=3.66 p < .01	very satisfied	4.11			strongly approve	4.56
			F=1.23				F=2.82 p < .05
N^2=.06 F=3.24 p < .05		N^2=.02 F=1.48		N^2=.02 F=.41		n^2=.05 F=.45	

APPROVAL OF MARRIED WOMAN WORKING	X
No	3.60
Yes	4.43
	F=15.20 p < .001

dominant status religious denominations (Anglicans, United Church, Presbyterians). The other, subordinate status, Protestant denominations and Catholics have significantly lower, and virtually identical, mean levels of approval of legal abortions. So there is at least partial support in these data for the hypothesis that dominant status groups are more likely to approve of widening the grounds for legalized abortion. The better educated, Canadians of British ancestry, and members of the major, main-line Protestant denominations exhibit greater approval for legalized abortion.

Turning to the expressive/symbolic measures we see a number of significant differences in approval of legal abortions. Frequency of church attendance significantly differentiates approval of legal abortion: frequent attenders are much less likely to approve and those Rs who never attend have the highest level of approval. But there is a significant departure from linearity ($F = 6.12$, $p. < .001$) in the relation between religious attendance and approval. In general, approval of legal abortion increases with decreasing frequency of attendance, except for those who attend only about once a year where approval drops slightly. Mean abortion approval scores also increase with decreasing religiosity: those Rs who describe themselves as strongly religious are significantly less approving of legal abortions. The several indicators of expressive/symbolic concerns drawn from the marriage and family area exhibit mixed results. There are no significant differences in attitudes toward approval of legal abortions by marital status, satisfaction with family life, or ideal number of children. This is at least partly a function of the restricted variation in these variables: a majority of Rs are married, very satisfied, and consider two children to be ideal. But approval does vary significantly by number of Rs' children: those having five or more children have quite low mean approval scores. However, there is a significant departure from linearity in

this relationship ($F = 3.24$, $p.<.05$). Mean approval scores decrease as we move from Rs with no children to those with one child; approval scores then begin to rise again for those with two and three children, whereafter they decline. There are also significant differences in approval of legal abortion by attitudes toward not having children and attitudes toward married women working. Those Rs with the more traditional family attitudes -- who disapprove of married couples not having children and of a married woman working if her husband can support here -- are less likely to approve of legalized abortion. So in these data we find substantial evidence that attitudes toward the law with respect to abortion are influenced by certain values, that the criminal law is viewed as a vehicle for the expression of certain beliefs.

Abortion Scale: Multivariate Prediction

Having examined this series of bivariate relationships, we now wish to explore a multivariate explanation and prediction of approval of legal abortion. The seven point abortion scale was used as the dependent variable for this analysis, along with a set of predictors representing both status characteristics and expressive beliefs selected from the significant variables in Table 2. Age and sex were also included as predictors to check for possible spuriousness and supressor effects, as well as to equalize the number of predictors of each type. These data were analyzed using correlation and regression techniques, with ordinal measures treated as interval given the robustness of regression analysis (Bohrnstedt and Carter, 1971; Boyle, 1970) and categorical variables (sex, religious denomination, ancestry, approval of married woman working) entered as dummy variables. The zero-order correlation matrix[2] revealed that the total associations between variables were generally small in magnitude. There was no evidence of collinearity problems among the

independent variables: only church attendance and religiosity approached being highly correlated. Frequency of church attendance showed the largest association with approval of abortion (-.36), with frequent attenders having more negative attitudes. Religiosity or strength of religious commitment had the second strongest relationship with approval (.33), with the less committed exhibiting greater approval. Being a member of a dominant status religious denomination was associated with greater approval (.30), while membership in a subordinate Protestant denomination or the Catholic church was related to disapproval (-.23 and -.19, respectively). Approval of a married woman working was also somewhat related to greater approval of legal abortion (.21). The remaining variables exhibited lower correlations with the abortion scale.

In the multiple regression the ten predictors were entered in blocks, with approval of legal abortion first regressed on the five indicators of status and the set of five indicators of expressive beliefs entered on the second step. Table 3 presents the summary of these results. Overall, the ten predictors combined explain a moderate amount (R^2 = .27) of the variation in approval of legal abortion (F = 7.15, p<.001). Furthermore, the set of five expressive variables add significantly to the variation in abortion approval explained by the five status variables (R^2 change = .14, F = 9.03, p<.01), thereby supporting our contention that the public's expressive/symbolic views of the law are important in explaining their attitudes toward particular legislation. However, Table 3 also indicates that only some of these predictors have significant net effects on the dependent variable. Membership in a subordinate Protestant denomination has the largest effect, net of other predictors, on approval of legal abortions (-.212); the effect of such denominational membership, compared to the reference category of no denomination, is to significantly lower the

TABLE 3

Multiple Regression of Attitudes Toward Abortion on Predictor Variables

VARIABLE	B	Std. Error B	Beta	F
Dominant Protestant Denomination	.0893	.321	.0240	.077
Subordinant Protestant Denomination	-.9565	.362	-.2124	6.99**
Catholic	-.6953	.337	-.1650	4.25*
Education	.0228	.034	.0424	.453
Sex	.0979	.221	.0269	.197
Ancestry	-.1023	.249	-.0277	.170
Age	.0195	.009	.1516	4.80*
Religiosity	.3891	.152	.1847	6.58*
Approval of Married Woman Working	.6450	.237	.1660	7.43**
Church Attendance	-.1214	.058	-.1546	4.34*
Number of Children	-.1172	.061	-.1271	3.71
Approval of No Children	.0301	.064	.0302	.224

$R = .522$

$R^2 = .273$

$R^2_{ADJ} = .234$

$S_e = 1.587$

ANOVA	DF	SS	MS	F	P
Regression	12	215.93	17.99	7.149	.001
Residual	229	576.42	2.52		

** $p < .01$
* $p < .05$

degree of support for legal abortions. Religiosity has the second largest effect (.185) and its regression coefficient indicates that Rs who describe themselves as having a strong religious commitment are less likely to favor legal abortions. Four additional variables share approximately equal effects. Those Rs who approve of a married woman working if her spouse can support her are also more likely to approve of legal abortions (.166); Catholics exhibit less support for legal abortion (-.165); more frequent church attenders show lower support (-.155); and older Rs are more likely to support legal abortions (.152). However, with respect to this latter result it should be recalled that the total association of age with approval of legal abortion is miniscule (r = -.014). Furthermore, age is not a statistically significant predictor initially when, on the first step, the abortion scale was regressed on the five status characteristics. This suggests the operation of a suppressor variable and when forward stepwise regression was used to isolate the suppressor variable, it was determined that age emerged as a statistically significant predictor when number of Rs' children was entered into the regression equation. Number of children is positively related to age (.47) but negatively related to abortion approval (-.15).

Since the net effects reported above are affected by the correlations among predictors, we also conducted a step-wise regression to check the relative contribution of these predictors to the explained variation in approval of legal abortion. While, in general, the results are quite similar, the ordering of the predictors is modified somewhat. In particular, church attendance explained the most variation in abortion scores (13%), followed by membership in the dominant status religious groups (4%), approval of a married woman working if her spouse can support her (3%), religiosity (1%) and membership in a subordinate status Protestant denomination (1%) or being Catholic (2%). But these results are

consistent with those of the previous regression in demonstrating the importance of expressive values, particularly those of a religious character, in accounting for degree of approval of legalized abortion. In addition, religious denominational membership is also crucial for explaining such approval while other status characteristics are relatively unimportant.[3]

In order to explore possible interaction effects in the prediction of abortion scale scores, the cross product terms for all first order interactions were included as additional variables in a multiple regression, with the forward step-wise procedure used to select significant interaction terms.[4] Four significant interactions were uncovered by this procedure: education by religiosity was selected on the first step after the initial predictor variables were entered (R^2 change = .041); religiosity by church attendance was selected on the next step (R^2 change = .026); then church attendance by number of children (R^2 change = .013); and finally, Catholic denominational membership by education (R^2 change = .014). The overall R^2 was increased to .36 ($F = 8.12$, $p < .001$). Each of these interactions was examined to determine the specific pattern of the results. For education by religiosity, the most highly educated who were not very religious had the highest abortion approval scores. Interestingly, however, the highly educated strongly religious Rs were among the least approving of legalized abortion. The interaction between religiosity and church attendance, as might be expected, indicated that the strongly religious who were very frequent church attenders were least approving of abortion. But surprisingly, the few (N=5) strongly religious Rs who rarely if ever attended church services were the most approving. For the interaction between church attendance and number of children, very frequent church attenders with three or more children were least approving while those Rs who rarely if ever attended church and had no children were most approving. Finally, non-Catholics who were

highly educated indicated most approval for legalized abortion while highly educated Catholics were less approving. Actually, the relationship between Catholic denominational membership and education in the prediction of abortion approval appeared curvilinear, but a larger number of cases would be required to ascertain more exact effects.

From our previous discussion of the distribution of abortion scale scores, it should now be recalled that 37% of the Rs scored at the highest position, indicating approval of legal abortion under all of the six conditions. This somewhat bimodal distribution violates the normal distribution assumption required for regression analysis. Furthermore, the bimodal pattern suggests splitting Rs into two groups -- those advocating legal abortion under all conditions (i.e., abortion on demand) versus other Rs -- and conducting a dummy dependent variable regression.[5] This regression explained approximately sixteen percent of the variation or transition from either no or qualified support for legal abortion, on the one hand, to total support for legal abortion under all of the conditions listed (R^2 = .157). Furthermore, on this dichotomous measure of support for legalized abortion the five expressive variables do not add significantly to the variation explained by the five status variables (R^2 change = .05, F = 2.75). But only two independent variables -- categories of religious denomination -- have significant net effects in predicting unconditional approval of legal abortion. Membership in either a subordinate status Protestant denomination or in the Catholic church is strongly related to opposition to unconditional support for legal abortion (abortion on demand). Interestingly, none of the other variables is a significant net predictor of this dichotomous dependent measure of support for legal abortion. The step-wise regression results in this case again showed church attendance explaining the most variation (6%), followed by the two religious denomination variables noted

above (4% and 2% respectively). Approval of a married woman working if her spouse can support her and religiosity each added approximately one percent to the variation explained in this dichotomous dependent variable. Again, then, we find evidence for the importance of expressive religious values as well as denominational membership, here in accounting for less than unconditional support for legalized abortion.

The distribution of abortion scores can be conceptualized as a scale measuring the liberalization of attitudes toward the legalization of abortion as the scores increase from one to six.[6] Lower scale scores represent more conditional or restricted approval for legal abortion, generally for medical reasons only, while higher scale scores indicate a liberalizing or widening of the grounds for legal abortion to include social conditions and personal preference. Given the bi-modal shape of the distribution of these scale scores, we decided to conduct a second dummy dependent variable regression by splitting the Rs into those giving only restricted approval (scores of one thru three) versus those Rs who support a widening or liberalizing of the legal grounds for abortion (scores four thru six). This regression explained 21% of the variation from limited, conditional approval for legal abortion to more liberal, unrestricted approval; and the five expressive variables added significantly to the variation explained by the status variables (R^2 change = .096, $F = 5.26$, $p < .001$). The results for the net effects of individual predictors are quite similar to those observed in Table 3: membership in a subordinate Protestant denomination exhibits the largest net effect (-.207), one of opposition to widening the grounds of support for legal abortion; age, religiosity and approval of a married woman working if her spouse can support her also have significant net effects comparable to those in Table 3. This indicates that older Rs and those who approve of a married woman working are more likely,

controlling for other variables, to support a liberalizing of the grounds for legal abortion while those Rs with a strong religious commitment oppose such a move. The exceptions to our general conclusion of similar findings here to those observed with the entire abortion scale as the dependent measure concern the absence of significant net effects for Catholic denominational membership and church attendance. While these two variables previously exhibited a moderate degree of predictive accuracy in explaining the full range of support for legalized abortion, the present results show that neither variable is a significant predictor of the transition from qualified support for medical reasons to a more liberal approval of legal abortion for social conditions. These results, along with those previously reported, suggest that while Catholic denominational membership may predict opposition to abortion on demand, such membership is not a significant source of opposition to some liberalization of abortion laws to recognize some social grounds for legal abortion. Of course, such a position is contrary to the official teaching of the Catholic church. Similarly, frequent church attendance does not necessarily result in opposition to some liberalization of abortion laws.

Summary and Conclusions

The major intent of this paper was to explore the relationship between criminal law and more general social norms and interests in the case of abortion legislation. We distinguished between status and symbolic-expressive predictors and expected both to contribute to explaining variation in approval of legalization of abortion. More specifically, we expected that dominant status groups would be more likely than their subordinate status counterparts to approve of widening the grounds for legalized abortion and that the symbolic-expressive predictors would contribute significantly to the explanation

of abortion approval, although we were unwilling to predict their relative effects compared to the status group predictors. We also expected to find somewhat different opinions concerning legalization of abortion depending upon the specific conditions specified.

In the univariate analysis we found some support for Hagan et al.'s (1977) contention that at least some dominant status groups are more likely than their subordinate counterparts to approve of widening the grounds for legalized abortion. Thus better educated Rs, those of British ancestry, and members of major Protestant denominations indicated greater approval of legalized abortion. However, a number of expressive variables were related to abortion approval in the expected direction: church attendance, religiosity, number of Rs' children, approval of a married couple not bearing or rearing children and approval of a married woman working if she has a husband capable of supporting her.

But the multivariate regression of abortion scale scores on the two sets of predictors gave but scant support to the hypothesis that membership in dominant status groups would result in greater approval of legalized abortion. Of the status group variables, only religious denomination and age were significant net predictors, though both were operating in the expected direction: members of subordinate religious denominations (Protestants and Catholics) showed less approval and older (more dominant) Rs indicated more approval. However, membership in a religious denomination is not without symbolic/expressive significance and age only emerged as a significant predictor when the expressive variable of number of Rs' children was entered into the regression. Rather, the major conclusion from this analysis was the importance of symbolic/expressive predictors, particularly those of a religious nature, in explaining attitudes toward legal abortion. These predictors not only as a group made a significant contribution to the explained variation in abortion attitudes; but in addition,

a number of the symbolic/expressive predictors exhibited significant net effects on abortion scale scores. So, in general expressive variables are more important than status group membership in explaining public opinion concerning legalization of abortion.

We also found support for the notion that public opinions concerning legalization of abortion would vary somewhat depending upon the specific conditions specified. This was, of course, observed when the responses to the six individual abortion approval items were examined. However, additional support for this conclusion came with the two dummy dependent variable regressions. Only religious denomination -- subordinate Protestant and Catholic -- explained opposition to abortion on demand. And being Catholic or a frequent church attender were not significant predictors of opposition to liberalizing abortion laws to recognize some social grounds in addition to medical reasons for legal abortion, although both were related to the entire range of abortion scale scores.

It appears that the current statement of the Canadian abortion statute (section 251) is generally congruent with public opinion, and it would not be wrong to categorize it as "custom reinstitutionalized". An overwhelming majority of Rs (93%) support abortion if the health of the mother is endangered, and we could not identify large subgroups of Rs who might move the law to either a more repressive or more liberal position on the issue of health. However, it is also clear that there are subgroups of the population who would support laws that are either more conservative or more liberal when other contingencies of abortion are considered (e.g. choice); but the explanatory variables in this case are primarily religiously based expressive items, not dominant status variables.

Given the pattern of explanatory variables, it would appear that if any pressure is exerted to change the abortion statute, it would be an entrepreneurial campaign based on symbolic issues or expressivity rather than one based on a dominant power base. As Becker (1963) and Gusfield (1967) demonstrated, this type of movement is capable of producing change; but given the current emphasis on legal realism, as well as the safeguards built into the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, it is unlikely that there will be any major or immediate change in the current statute.

Using Weber's (1954) description of ideal types of legal systems, we can categorize Canada as being substantively rational as opposed to being formally rational. That is, our common law system tends to blend written laws with the specific details of cases in order to produce just decisions. A more formally rational system does not permit the individual details of any case to alter the letter of the law (cf. Kidder, 1983). If this classification can be accepted, then there is reason to believe that expressive dimensions may still play a role in determining the specific application or outcome of any law since a substantively rational system by definition permits flexibility in interpretation.

We must realize that there is more to the law than legislative statute, and the conflict over abortion may take place to a much greater extent within other areas of law-making in society. The current statement of the law does not make a rational attempt to answer several key questions, such as the time or viability of life, and it supplies no definition of health. Furthermore, the current statute leaves the substantive problem of definition up to regulatory hospital boards and it is here that organized pressures may shift the actual application of the law to a more conservative or liberal stance. The more conservative stance may be supported by simply not establishing commissions to

determine health or by making them unwieldy to bypass; or the more liberal position may pressure for broadly defined definitions of health. The struggle over restriction or liberalization can take place at this level and not be as subject to public scrutiny as in the case of legislative change. Policy made by a regulatory board may permit some limited influence of expressive concerns which may not be broadly representative of public opinion. On the other hand, the fact that regulatory boards can in fact determine policy means that regional and local opinions can best be represented in the substantive application of the law. The conflict interpretation of this situation would probably suggest that the law is subject to manipulation by the powerful, while the consensus argument would be that the law is in fact functional and contains mechanisms for satisfying the variety of opinions present in society on conflict-type crimes.

In a substantively rational system an additional area of lawmaking is the judicial, but until recently the courts have not been widely seen as playing a major role in Canada. Russell (1982) argues that the influence of court decisions has been more widereaching than we commonly realize and that they do in fact make some determination of policy, in spite of their lip-service to the notion of parliamentary supremacy. In light of the new Charter of Rights and Freedoms, there is every reason to expect that courts may be pushed more and more into areas formerly thought of as legislative, and their rulings may have far reaching implications. Evidence for the role that the judiciary may play is clearly seen by the recent ruling that a fetus did have access to insurance benefits (Globe and Mail, February 1984).

Thus, although we have concluded that the present Canadian abortion legislation does appear to represent a common ground, we should also recognize that there are built-in elements within our system that permit negotiation over the conditions of application of the law. Because of this, it is our view that

the current statement of the legislation is unlikely to change in the immediate future, while expressions of discontent with the law will likely continue to operate at the regulatory and judicial level.

FOOTNOTES

1. In order to provide adequate population estimates it was determined that 320 completed questionnaires would be necessary. Given an anticipated 80 percent completion rate, an original sample of 400 was necessary. This provides a sampling frame of 3 in 1000 with households as the sampling unit. In a family household either a husband or wife was eligible for interviewing while in non-family households any member over the age of eighteen was eligible. Because of a concern that women were more likely to be home and thus be oversampled, interviewers were instructed to try to obtain an equal number of male and female Rs and were to request to talk to the male head of the household in the first third of the interviews; thereafter, either the male or the female head of the household was interviewed.
2. A copy of this table is available from the authors upon request.
3. When we examined the one-way analysis of variance in Table 2, we observed two variables -- church attendance and number of Rs' children -- in which there was a significant departure from linearity in their relationship with abortion approval. These nonlinear relations were explored through polynomial regression. The squared term for number of Rs' children failed to significantly improve the variation in abortion approval explained by its unsquared term. However, the cube of church attendance did add significantly to the variation in abortion approval explained by the original church attendance variable and its square. To further examine the effect of this nonlinear relationship, the abortion scale was regressed on the predictor variables but with the cube of church attendance substituted for its original value. The major consequence of this procedure is to enhance the importance of the cube of church attendance such that it now

has the largest net effect on abortion approval. Furthermore, religiosity declines in importance such that it no longer is a significant predictor. The effects of the remaining predictors remain essentially unchanged.

4. The criteria for selection were an F value statistically significant at the .05 level or better and a tolerance level of .05 (i.e., 5% of the variance of a potential predictor term is unexplained by predictors already entered). The latter criterion is important given the usual presence of multicollinearity between original variables and cross product terms. When the tolerance level was changed to .10, only the religiosity by church attendance term was selected (R^2 change = .021).

5. After a comparison of log-linear and dependent dummy variable regression methods, Knoke (1975) concluded that where the dependent dichotomy falls in the range of .25 to .75 (as in the present instance), the choice of method will probably make little difference since the results are likely to be identical. Furthermore, Gillespie (1977) has pointed out that dummy dependent variable regression has the advantage of conveniently handling data sets in which the dependent variable is a dichotomy, but one or more of the independent variables is continuous.

6. A score of zero, of course, indicates no approval of abortion under any of the six conditions listed. The fifteen Rs who answered in this fashion were analyzed in terms of the several predictor variables used in the regression in order to determine if those Rs were distinctive (e.g., older, female, Catholics who were strongly religious, had many children and so forth). However, no such characteristics were readily observeable, although there were no Rs under the age of 27 and no members of dominant Protestant religious denominations. When the regression on the scale scores was repeated with these fifteen Rs removed, the results were quite

similar to those reported in Table 3. The R^2 was reduced to .22 and the net effect of age was increased (but again only after the expressive variables were entered into the regression).

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